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Post qualifying specialist awards: approaches to enabling work-based learning in social work.

Abstract:

All post-qualifying social work specialist awards are required to include 'enabling the learning of others', so that specialist social workers can provide basic support to learners in the workplace. This paper reports on a new programme unit designed at Bournemouth University to meet these requirements. In order to deal with the complexity of practice we place importance on practitioners being able to identify and interpret the multifaceted nature of situations whilst considering a range of alternative options. Professional development should therefore be concerned with approaches and processes (capabilities) as well as fixed knowledge and outcomes (competences). Thus, the type of work-based learning required to develop such skills, abilities and attributes is also necessarily rich in complexity. The design of this Unit aims to provide for these more holistic and flexible outcomes when enabling such learning and development in self and others.

Introduction

In February 2005 the social care workforce regulator for England, the General Social Care Council (GSCC), launched the revised post-qualifying (PQ) framework for social work education and training. There are three levels of awards in the new framework, each corresponding to a stage of professional and career development:

- The Post-Qualifying Award in Specialist Social Work (H level - year 3 undergraduate);
- The Post-Qualifying Award in Higher Specialist Social Work (M level - Masters);
- The Post-Qualifying Award in Advanced Social Work (M level - Masters).

and five specialisms focusing on:

- Mental health;
- Adult social care;
- Practice education;
- Leadership and management;
- Children and young people, their families and carers.

This change has meant that the existing Practice Teacher Award for post-qualifying social workers has been replaced by a specific Practice Education Pathway programme at higher specialist and advanced levels; and by a compulsory requirement to include learning on 'enabling others' on the programmes at specialist level (e.g. Children and Families), usually as a unit or module. This requirement prepares students to teach and assess social work qualifying students and mentor and support colleagues. There is an expectation that all social workers should be actively involved in supporting learning in their workplace and the GSCC have made it clear that all social workers from the point of qualification onwards should begin to contribute to the learning of others – not as an 'extra' but as a core part of their professional role (GSCC 2005).

This paper reports on the design of an 'Enabling Work-based Learning' Unit at Bournemouth University to meet the specialist level requirement as detailed above. The aim was to develop the Unit in such a way that, as a result of completing the unit, candidates would be capable of enabling their own as well as others' learning and development in the workplace. To this end our design incorporated three features: a particular blend of learning; a more inductive approach to the content and theory of the Unit (which resulted in our own handbook being written); and a combined assessment approach. There is nothing unique in any of these features; however we feel that the way they have been brought together has created a distinctive pedagogical style.

Background – policy requirements

We can look in more detail at the change in post-qualifying social work education for a moment. Professional development has become a wider subject for debate as recent policy emphasis suggests that the overriding purpose of universities is to prepare students for the world of work (Rickard 2002, Leitch 2006). Because of the importance placed by the Government on high quality practice learning as a key part of workforce development strategy, the revision of the post-qualifying framework needed to include measures which would address existing problems. In particular, a number of significant barriers to work-based learning being a cornerstone of workplace development (Slater 2007) had arisen:

- A shortage of people in the workplace with appropriate skills and knowledge to support / assess qualifying social work students;
- A shortage of people with appropriate skills and knowledge to support / assess other forms of work-based learning, both formal and informal;
- A shortage of practice learning opportunities (placements) for qualifying social work students;
- The need to provide more impetus for the development of learning cultures within social care organisations which support and encourage learning and development across the workforce.

The more wide-ranging and accessible *Practice Education Pathway* in the new PQ framework is designed to ensure that there are:

- Larger numbers of people able to support all forms of work-based learning and contribute to the development of effective learning cultures;
- Opportunities for people with a particular interest in practice education to further develop their skills and knowledge with an emphasis on the strategic and organisational aspects of learning and development.

The compulsory requirement for 'enabling others' within the Specialist Awards is intended to ensure that all social workers qualified at the specialist level have the knowledge and skills to contribute to the support of all forms of workplace learning, as well as understanding that it is a core component of their professional role to play an active part in the support of workplace learning. The requirement is to specifically develop knowledge and skills in supporting and mentoring colleagues and in teaching and assessing social work students and others.

Although there will be some variations between the way that Specialist Award programmes meet this GSCC requirement, the majority have included a specific module or unit within their awards which focuses on 'enabling others'. These modules / units are generally rated at 15 or 20 credits, making up approximately 1/6th of the Specialist Award.

The changes brought about by the introduction of the revised PQ framework should bring real advantages for employers – offering the opportunity to improve involvement in learning in the workplace for social workers, with an increase in the overall number of people with appropriate skills and knowledge to support and assess work-based learning. The Specialist Awards should help social workers develop a basic understanding of the importance of contributing to the development of a learning culture within their workplace.

However, although the 'enabling others' section in the new Specialist Awards will ensure that there are considerably larger numbers of social workers with specific training in the basics of supporting and assessing learning in the workplace, this new award will not give people the same depth of knowledge and skills as the Practice Teaching Award. Although they will be able to make a significant contribution to learning and assessment in the workplace, it is unlikely that candidates who have completed their Specialist Awards will have the confidence, knowledge and skills to take full responsibility for teaching and assessing qualifying social work students without good quality ongoing mentoring, support and training (Gilchrist 2007). Employers, in partnership with undergraduate programme providers, will therefore need to give careful thought to how they can ensure that those who are taking responsibility for social work students in practice are fully equipped and supported to take this responsibility.

It is worth noting that although the GSCC require that the final assessment of qualifying students on social work degree programmes is made by a qualified social worker, there is no requirement that this social worker has undertaken any training in practice education. Discussions about the type of preparation people who are undertaking this important role require, should perhaps take place between all stakeholders (practice learning opportunity providers, university programme leaders, students, service users and their carers and practice assessors) in local social work programmes.

Unit design – theoretical underpinnings

The design of our 'enabling others' Unit (entitled Enabling Work-based Learning) aims to give Specialist Award candidates the potential to support all forms of work-based learning - i.e. the professional development of themselves and others. In order to achieve this aim our first consideration was to understand more about the nature of professional development itself.

One crucial aspect appears to concern practice competence and being 'safe to practice'. The National Occupational Standards (Topss 2002) and GSCC Codes of Practice (GSCC 2002) provide an effective basis for assessing many of the important aspects of practice competence, thereby providing a method for judging 'safety to practice' which can be incorporated into the design of the Unit. However, in our view, safe practice is about more than competence. Any practice in the social care context consists not just of a framework of 'set' knowledge and skills, but also the deliberations, judgments and decisions which are made when applying such knowledge and skills. Meeting competencies on paper does not in itself ensure that workers are educated to fully develop the professional capability or dynamic competence that will enable them to function effectively in the complex and rapidly evolving social care world (Doel et al. 2002). We believe a more mindful and considered practice is required rather than an unthinking adoption of processes and procedures, especially as conditions can differ so much from one social care situation to the next.

The literature appears to support this view. For example, Fook et al (2000) show how practitioners at a more expert level do not only know what to do and when to do it, or what to do when things go wrong, they also start to develop the confidence and capability to know what to do when presented with a new and different situation. The focus on practice is discussed by Adams et al. (2002) who demonstrate that advanced critical practice embodies the complexity of a situation rather than simplifies or ignores it. The idea of disciplined but creative practice is highlighted by Taylor and White (2006) who encourage practitioners to allow for 'respectful uncertainty' when making judgments (i.e. to look for alternative readings of a situation) and adopt a reflective, analytic, systematic process of judgment that acknowledges emotion and interpretation. This theme is echoed in Gray and Gibbons' (2007)

notion of 'no answers, only choices in practice'. They argue that because prescriptive frameworks do not resolve complex problems, practitioners need to become ethically responsible for their choices and develop good judgment in action.

There are also a number of associated models regarding the development of expertise in practice, e.g. Benner (1984) in the nursing profession. The more generic five stage model of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) charts the development of expertise as a gradual transition from a rigid adherence to taught rules and procedures through to a largely intuitive mode of operation, which relies heavily on deep tacit understanding. Here, learning from experience is the main force of transition. This model is extended by Fook et al. (2000) to include a final stage of development that takes account of elements that are more than routine and practised behaviour - for example creativity, transferability, flexibility, as well the openness necessary to deal with ill-formed and uncertain or new situations in social work. This more holistic approach is concerned with approaches and processes rather than fixed knowledge and outcomes. It places importance on an expert practitioner being able to identify the multifaceted nature of situations whilst considering a range of alternative options.

In respect of the ideas above, the idea of practice expertise cannot be defined in prescriptive terms. Such an holistic and interpretive approach is identified earlier by Lester (1995) who argued it is no longer adequate to base professional development on transmitting existing knowledge or developing a predefined range of competences or requirements. Instead, he argues practitioners need to be able to construct and reconstruct the knowledge and skills they need and continually evolve their practice, in order to respond intelligently to unknown situations and go beyond established knowledge to create unique interpretations and outcomes. This range of abilities and attributes extends beyond being able to apply a body of expert knowledge to known situations and problems in order to produce rational solutions. His creative and interpretive model is not just concerned with logic but with values and perspective as well. A person's expert 'skill' lies in being able to theorise the situation first in order to construct the problem to be solved. Key tools are synthesis, situational and ethical understandings, and the ability to interpret the meanings of situations from a range of perspectives and standpoints; as well as analysis and expert knowledge. What we have as a result is not a reduced concept of professional expertise but an appreciation of the holism, interconnectedness and value-based divergent nature of situations and problems.

Barnett and Coate's (2005) work-based in the Higher Education arena is worth consideration here too as it offers a similar approach. It incorporates three broad areas (or domains) for the development of what these authors call professional capability. These domains are deliberately labelled as verbs to stress the dynamic nature of learning in the modern world. Firstly, 'knowing' is not about the knowledge itself being important, but the way that knowledge is understood, interpreted, critically analysed, evaluated and applied that matters.

Next, 'acting' refers to the way professionals 'act' in work, i.e. the way that they approach situations and the underlying skills and attributes that guide and define their actions, which should be analysed, evaluated and reviewed. Lastly, 'being' is the important domain that is central to the model and is the area in which this model varies most significantly from earlier work. Learning in this domain, which includes developing a sense of self-awareness, self-confidence and development as reflective practitioners, is, they say, fundamental to effective professional performance in a modern world.

We therefore have a range of ideas which seem to suggest the complex, interpretive and holistic nature of professional development. It would appear to follow that any support, facilitation and associated learning should take account of this, encouraging learners to take responsibility for their individual practice through a critical questioning stance (McGill & Beaty 1995; Moon 1999). In fact, Barnett (1997) has argued that such a level of critical awareness and meta-cognition is required to work in our age of supercomplexity.

Thus, if we can accept that at any level or stage someone's practice is always more than a set of mechanistic processes, then the way the more holistic and interpretive processes are acknowledged and valued in any learning experience will affect the way their relative importance is viewed by the practitioner. This was our starting point in designing the Enabling Work-based Learning Unit.

Unit design – practicalities

Having gained an overall starting point our next step was to ensure the necessary coverage as specified by the GSCC (GSCC/Topps 2002) for 'enabling others' at specialist level. Coverage is split into three domains, each of which contains several competencies (there are 26 competencies in all). The three domains covered by the Unit's learning outcomes are:

- Co-ordinate, organise and manage learning;
- Facilitate learning;
- Assess achievement / competence / capability.

The GSCC require that some, but not all, of these requirements for enabling others at the specialist level are met through being involved in the assessment of a qualifying social work student. Candidates will usually be in employment at the time of undertaking the Unit, and have some meaningful involvement with the assessment of a social work student, and have the opportunity to plan, deliver, review, and evaluate a range of learning experiences. This could be achieved in a variety of ways working with either groups or individuals over a reasonably sustained period of time.

Much of the candidates' learning will, of course, be experiential in nature and involve constructing deeper meaning from that experience within the context of reflective learning and the critically reflective practitioner (e.g. Schön 1987; Moon 1999; Rolfe et al. 2001). Bines and Watson's (1992) 'post-technocratic' model for professional education also emphasises a similar approach, i.e. through experience of practice and reflection on practice.

As we have seen, the nature of professional development is complex and a key pedagogical aim was to ensure that candidates will develop the skills, knowledge and values needed to enable others to develop not just their competence in practice but also their professional capability, as recommended by the literature. To achieve this we needed to develop an ethos and an approach towards learning that would allow the notion of professional capability to become truly embedded within experiential and reflective learning, teaching and assessment methods and activities.

Learning in this context was therefore approached as an individual, multi-layered, and a mainly constructive activity. We believed this learning needed to be modelled within the course in order to achieve effective transfer to the workplace, i.e. to enable others. The Unit thus encourages candidates to:

- Take active responsibility for their learning now and in the future;
- Adopt a critically reflective approach to practice learning;
- Adopt an inductive approach to learning and assessment theory;
- Develop a range of individual and social learning skills.

The specially written course handbook (Williams and Rutter 2007) is a key feature in this approach. This handbook collates, summarises, and organises relevant theory for 'enabling others' in this context, but more importantly it considers theory holistically by following the 'knowing, acting and being' stance of Barnett and Coate (2005) as detailed in the previous section. In this respect knowledge, skills and values are examined as integral elements of learning and development. The handbook adopts a critically reflective (analytical and evaluative) approach to practice. It also enables critical reflection in others with its emphasis on understanding the various processes at work and the ways they can be facilitated and developed, for example with the use of critical questioning (Brookfield 1987)

The handbook's aim is to help candidates develop a more critical approach to their role as a practice educator with questions and exercises which make use of their prior and current experiences. It also aims to facilitate the construction of candidates' own understanding of the material by encouraging an inductive application of learning and assessment theory, i.e. where practice situations and requirements are considered first. This method starts to develop

the abilities and confidence to interpret material within different contexts in order to understand where, how, and why application differs. The idea of lifelong learning is promoted too, with an emphasis on continuing to maximise the potential for learning from informal practice experience.

By reading the handbook in its entirety candidates are working through a process of considering the most essential underpinning theory for their own requirements and for developing capability as well as competency. They are therefore being introduced to relevant theory in respect of how and why they might use it, or not, when meeting their learners' needs. In this way more active learning should be occurring than if we have merely provided a 'what it is' text book on learning and assessment theory. Our approach is aimed at 'kick-starting' the thought processes for more inductive, holistic use of theory.

Here we have followed the particular view of Margetson (2000 cited Nixon and Murr 2006, p.807) who advocates that learners should *not* be encouraged to apply theory to practice deductively (i.e. starting to reason with theoretical knowledge in order to apply it to practice), a more usual method in formal education, because it develops fixed 'templates' which do not fit more complex situations. In effect, she says, the situation becomes manipulated to fit the theory, which distorts true understanding. Rather, inductive problem-solving is advocated (where reasoning is developed first from observed examples with reference back to theoretical knowledge) which enables more interpretive habits and in turn allows for complexity and creativity to be taken into account.

The inductive approach allows for a reinterpretation of meaning in new contexts rather than imposition of one truth across contexts, and for Fook et al. (2000, p.191) becomes 'contextual theory development'. In Daley's study (2001) it was found that incorporating new knowledge for practitioners is a recursive transforming process, rather than a simple straightforward transfer of information from one context to another. Such valid professional knowledge created from work practice echoes earlier conclusions by Schön (1983) and Eraut (1994) that learners should be supported and guided through their experience to understand and determine the value of such knowledge, and critically evaluate the development of their own work-based theories.

This more holistic approach to a practitioner's learning also allows for a wider, flexible and more open 'window' on new knowledge or skills, and aligns more successfully with certain adult-learning principles of relevancy, use of previous experience, problem-solving approaches, and self-direction (Knowles 1990).

Encouraging candidates to take responsibility for their learning now and in the future begins with the Unit's overall structure. It is a 5 day course - 2 days consist of workshops and 3 days

are used for guided but self-managed learning. The handbook is used as the learning aid for both, but a separate Student Guide works with the course handbook providing suggested timetables for the activities, guide times for completion, and a record of work undertaken. This Student Guide is for candidates' 'eyes only' so that candidates retain full responsibility for their own learning. It tries to address the issue of learners sometimes feeling unsupported during such independent learning experiences.

The blend of learning experiences within the Unit should develop a wide range of independent and social learning skills. As candidates are directly working with their placement students and other learners in the workplace, much experiential learning is occurring at the time of the Unit and beyond. The workshops use discussions and exercises to exploit the advantages of group learning around this, i.e. discussing a wider range of practice experiences and extending understanding by exploring concepts together. As many of the handbook's activities are reflective exercises using past and present experiences, reflective as well as constructive learning is encouraged.

Our assessment methods also needed to be constructively aligned (Biggs 2003) to the learning objectives, as well as to our approach. A 20 credit H level Unit allows the equivalent of a 5,000 word piece of work. As candidates are expected to provide evidence of meeting all the GSCC's 26 competencies within the three domains (detailed earlier), as well as their critical reflection on practice, we split the assessment into two sections to meet the two different requirements. The first requirement we judged to be best achieved using a 'Record of Competence' – a brief written account of what a candidate did in their own words to meet each of the competencies, equivalent to 1,000 words. The account is verified by a professionally qualified member of staff within the workplace who knows the candidate's work.

A more in-depth and critically reflective method, in the form of a 4,000 word reflective assignment, was chosen for the second requirement, which allows the candidate to focus on specifically chosen issue/s from each of the three domains. Issues chosen would be expected to relate to the learning the candidate is experiencing from undertaking the organisation, facilitation and assessment of learners in the workplace, and thus should create meaningful and useful discussion. An inductive stance towards theory is obviously encouraged here and allows candidates to validly articulate their 'practice theory'. This type of professional knowledge is created by the worker by combining and re-combining more explicit theoretical knowledge with an understanding of tacit or implicit knowledge from professional processes (Nixon and Murr 2006).

Unit design - evaluation

We have gained initial feedback from a focus group conducted with a September 2007 cohort of 17 students regarding the design of the Unit.

Self managed learning:

One student (who had stated at the beginning of the Unit that she really disliked the idea of self managed learning) reported that as the course had progressed she realised that it was much more productive to use group time to explore complex issues and to use individual time for reading and developing knowledge. She described herself as 'a bit of a convert'.

Another student commented: "How can we hope to enable the learning of others unless we can manage our own learning? This course has provided a great opportunity to improve my independent learning skills."

Workshops:

Candidates particularly valued the opportunities to share experiences and ideas in small groups. They particularly commented on the value of talking to people with different roles, from different types of workplaces, and different experiences of being involved in enabling learning. They liked the opportunities for in-depth discussions around the handbook's group exercises focusing on complex issues e.g. setting standards in assessment.

A student commented: "Workshops plus the book was perfect, workshops without the book would have been hopeless"

Course handbook:

Not everyone had used the handbook away from the workshops as intended, as some still thought of it as a text book. Students who had used it for self managed learning reported that the timings for the work were about right – some had done the work in large blocks, others in smaller pieces – they liked the flexibility to work in a way that suited individual approaches to learning. The written learning materials on the whole were described as excellent - very clearly written and designed to help the reader explore issues and make practice to theory links.

Unit design – future

Our evaluation so far shows that more explicit guidance regarding usage of the handbook, and its underpinning approach, is necessary to ensure its full potential is realised as a self managed learning tool for this context. This can be achieved with clarification in the Guide and through discussion in the workshops. Updating and minor revisions of all learning

materials will, of course, be ongoing, and more detailed evaluations are planned with the new cohorts.

Conclusion

The Unit was actively designed to encourage learners to take responsibility for their individual practice through a reflective but also a questioning stance in order to develop capability for enabling others in the workplace. Enabling others is about the facilitation of learning and the empowerment of people, and relies more on considered and critical appreciation of educational situations than mechanistic application of theory. By valuing the more holistic and interpretive processes and abilities concerning work-based learning and education within the Unit we are able to demonstrate and model their value and importance for our candidates. By embedding the notion of professional capability within the Unit's design, methods and materials, we hope candidates will be enabled to deal creatively with the complexity of workplace learning situations.

It could be said that enabling others to practise more critically and reflectively encourages all those involved to different ways of articulating and expressing what they do. . An added bonus is that the important but less explicit elements of practice can become more visible and more clearly articulated for feedback and assessment purposes of this Unit. The candidate's professional voice is more likely to be heard and the values implicit in social work practice become apparent in practice education as well. In this respect, professional knowledge becomes more holistic and concerned with 'being' rather than just 'knowing', and thus necessarily as complex and extensive as advocated by the literature. The best type of learning helps professionals see:

“...the process of judgement more realistically and hence may become more reflexive, analytic and systematic in their sense-making activities.” (Taylor and White 2006, p.950)

As stated earlier there is nothing unique in any of the Unit's features. However, the way they have been brought together has, for us, created a distinctive pedagogical style. In the ways described above we believe social workers may be educated to take a necessary active role in support of workplace learning, enabling their own and others' professional competence and capability in the complex world of practice.

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